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Statement by the Bahá'í International Community (United Nations Office), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Transforming collective deliberation: valuing unity and justice

1. The most compelling model for the integration of the world's cultures and peoples may lie in the complexity and coordination that characterize the human body. Within this organism, millions of cells, with extraordinary diversity of form and function, collaborate to make human existence possible. Every small cell has its part to play in maintaining a healthy body; from its inception, each is linked to a lifelong process of giving and receiving. In the same manner, efforts around the world to build communities guided by values of cooperation and reciprocity are challenging notions that human nature is essentially selfish, competitive and driven by material considerations. The growing consciousness of a common humanity lying beneath the surface of our different identities is redefining our relationships with each other as peoples, as nations and as co-stewards of our natural environment. Whether stubbornly opposed in some societies or welcomed elsewhere as a release from suffocating oppression, the understanding that we are all part of an indivisible human family is becoming the standard by which our collective efforts are judged.

2. In this time of transition to a new social order, processes of social integration are gathering momentum alongside related processes of disintegration. Collapsed moral foundations, outworn institutions and a sense of disillusionment foment chaos and decline in the social order while, at the same time, integrative forces raise up new bases for collaboration and transform the nature and scope of collective action. Such integrative processes are evidenced by growing social networks facilitated, inter alia, by information technology; expanded suffrage and formal participation in governance; collective approaches to knowledge generation and dissemination; the spread of education and consciousness-raising regarding human interdependence; and the evolution of new mechanisms of international cooperation. Similarly, one discerns emerging processes of decision-making that are increasingly inclusive, unifying and just, and that challenge partisanship as a means of addressing problems facing increasingly interdependent communities.

3. In this context, the Bahá'í International Community would like to offer its experience with a process of collective inquiry called consultation, which serves as the basis for deliberation and decision-making in Bahá'í communities around the world. Consultation is an approach to collective inquiry that is unifying rather than divisive. Participants are encouraged to express themselves freely as they engage in discussion, yet take care to do so in a dignified and courteous manner. Detachment from one's positions and opinions regarding the matter under discussion is imperative — once an idea has been shared, it is no longer associated with the individual who expressed it, but becomes a resource for the group to adopt, modify or discard. As consultation unfolds, participants strive to identify and apply moral principles relevant to the matter at hand. These may include the equality of men and women, stewardship of the natural environment, the elimination of prejudice and the abolishment of the extremes of wealth and poverty. This approach, unlike those of partisan confrontation or debate, seeks to shift the deliberation towards a new centre, manoeuvring away from competing claims and interests to the arena of principle, where collective goals and courses of action are more likely to surface and prevail.

4. Great value is placed on the diversity of perspectives and contributions that individuals bring to the discussion. Diversity is harnessed to enrich collective inquiry and deliberation. Actively soliciting views from those traditionally excluded from decision-making not only increases the pool of intellectual resources but also fosters the trust, inclusion and mutual commitment needed for collective action. For example, the valuing of diversity and the encouragement of minorities shapes the practice of electing local governing councils (called local spiritual assemblies), within Bahá'í communities: in the case of a tied vote, the position is awarded to the minority candidate.

5. On its own, however, a diversity of perspectives does not provide communities with a means to bridge differences or to resolve social tensions. In consultation, the value of diversity is inextricably linked to the goal of unity. This is not an idealized unity, but one that acknowledges differences and strives to transcend them through a process of principled deliberation. It is unity in diversity. While participants have different views or understandings of the issues at hand, they exchange and explore these differences in a unifying manner within the framework of consultation and from a commitment to the process and principles that guide it. In environments where sects, political factions, conflicting groups and entrenched discrimination weaken communities and leave them exposed to exploitation and oppression, unity, based in justice, is a quality of human interaction to be fostered and defended. The principle of "unity in diversity" also applies to the manner in which the decisions of the consulting body are carried out: all participants are called on to support the decision arrived at by the group regardless of the opinions they expressed in the discussion. If the decision proves incorrect, all participants will learn from its shortcomings and revise the decision as needed.

6. The principles and objectives of the consultative process rest on the understanding that human beings are essentially noble, that they possess reason and conscience as well as capacities for inquiry, understanding, compassion and service to the common good. In the absence of this perspective, labels such as "marginalized", "poor", or "vulnerable", with their emphasis on needs and deficiencies, often obscure these human qualities and capacities. To be sure, needs and underlying injustices must be addressed by the consultative process but individuals, as participants in the consultation, must strive to see each other in light of their inherent nobility and potential. They must each be accorded the freedom to exercise the faculties of reason and conscience; to set forth their views; to seek out truth and meaning for themselves; and to see the world through their own eyes. For the many who have not experienced these freedoms, consultation helps to initiate a process by which they gradually become protagonists of their own development and full participants in a world civilization.

7. The experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community, residing in 188 countries and 45 territories, suggests that the consultative process has universal application and does not favour any one culture, class, race or gender. Bahá'ís strive to apply the principles of consultation within their families, communities, organizations, businesses and elected bodies. As this practice is refined, it allows participants to attain greater levels of insight and understanding about the matters under consideration; to foster more constructive modes of expression; to channel diverse talents and perspectives towards common goals; to build solidarity of thought and action; and to uphold justice at every stage of the process. In order to develop and apply these integrative processes worldwide and to enable them to truly yield their

fruit, they will need to be coupled with efforts to provide universal education, to reform modes of governance, to eliminate prejudice and the extremes of wealth and poverty and to promote an international auxiliary language to facilitate communication among all peoples and nations. Such efforts will give rise to forms of social integration that are unifying and just and through which all peoples can strive together to build a new social order.

8. We conclude by inviting you to join in a collaborative process of inquiry by considering the following questions. Concerning consultation: What assumptions about human nature and social organization underlie adversarial patterns of deliberation and decision-making (for example debate, propaganda, partisanship, etc.)? What views of human nature give rise to mutualistic, reciprocal and cooperative patterns of deliberation and decision-making? How can we foster deliberative processes that encourage freedom of expression and build unity among participants? What social structures need to be in place to support more inclusive processes of deliberation and decision-making? What is the role of leadership and authority in unifying processes of deliberation and decision-making? What are other examples of integrative processes of decision-making? Concerning social integration: How can social tensions be resolved in a unifying framework? How do we ensure that raising consciousness and addressing the conditions of injustice that affect a particular group does not reinforce divisive distinctions? How do we ensure that emphasizing the value of unity does not reinforce passive habits of acceptance and resignation but rather strengthens the will to champion justice?